



Submission 2

Rvd. J. Lane 22/8/08

House Standing Committee on Procedure
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Committee Secretary

I write to you regarding the House Standing Committee on Procedure's Inquiry into the Conduct of the Business of the House to propose a number of changes to enhance the House of Representatives and encourage a more interactive Chamber. Please find the proposals attached.

Short lived radical changes by the Government to the operation of the House of Representatives earlier this year were superficial and did not address the core challenge of ensuring that the Parliament is inclusive, accessible and that it provides an effective mechanism for Executive accountability. This was underlined by the speed with which the changes were withdrawn.

The Coalition believes that the proposals outlined below will assist in addressing the real concerns of ensuring that the House promotes public accessibility as well as providing Members of the House with greater opportunities to contribute and to assist in stimulating participation.

Kind regards

The Hon Joe Hockey MP
Manager of Opposition Business in the House

Proposals to enhance and promote a more interactive House of Representatives

Proposal One: Extra Sitting Time

I propose that the number of sitting weeks each year and the hours with which the Parliament sits be increased to allow for additional time for Government Business.

Extending the hours that the Parliament sits will enable the incorporation of more Government Business. One way to achieve this could be for the House to sit earlier each scheduled sitting Tuesday.

By removing the Friday sitting days, the Government removed thirteen days with which the House sits in 2008. The current sitting pattern for 2008 has 69 scheduled sitting days for the House of Representatives.

An increase in both the number of hours that the House sits and the number of sitting weeks scheduled in 2008 balances the need for the House to function effectively whilst also enabling Members to represent their electorates in the Federal Parliament and to communicate with their constituents locally.

Proposal Two: Question Time – Limits to Answers

I propose that the House of Representatives Standing Orders be amended to limit the time taken to answer a question without notice as is the case in the Senate. The Senate limits questions to one minute and answers to four minutes.

In 2007, the average time taken to respond to a question during Question Time was 2 minutes and 55 seconds. In 2008 there have been a number of Ministers who are delivering extended, scripted answers. In fact, the average time taken by the Government to respond to a question in 2008 has blown out to 3 minutes and 10 seconds.

This is underlined by the trend of the Government to spend significant time answering their own questions and less time answering Opposition questions. In fact, of the total time spent by the Government answering questions in 2008, only 28% of that time has been spent answering Opposition and Independent questions.

It is worth noting that in a recent submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure inquiry '*Question Time Procedures*', the Clerk of the House noted that "time limits would reduce the risk of more prolonged answers, answers which are more likely to give rise to challenges on the ground of relevance."

This is highlighted by the fact that the Government has overwhelmingly used Question Time as an opportunity to attack the Coalition. Of the first 550 questions asked in 2008, the Government has used the opportunity to attack and blame the Coalition in 422 or 77% of their responses. This is in stark contrast to the incoming

Coalition Government in 1996 who blamed the Labor Party in 25% less of their responses than the incoming Rudd Government.

It is also worth noting that in a submission on 21 November 2006 to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure, Julia Gillard on behalf of the Labor Party recommended the application of time limits in the House, one minute and four minutes, as per the Senate.

Proposal Three: Second Reading Speeches – Question Sessions

I propose that the House of Representatives Standing Orders be amended to reduce the speaking time of Members during the second reading debate from 20 to 15 minutes. The 5 minutes saved could then be used to allow Members to ask questions of the person having just spoken. This proposal is referred to as the '15:5' proposal.

The proposal would be limited to participants in the second reading debate but would not affect the 30 minute limit on the initial speech delivered by a Member of the Executive.

The proposal is aimed at enlivening debate by encouraging speakers to hold stronger views on Bills. It will also encourage backbenchers to remain in the Chamber to listen to debate which would assist addressing the issue often raised of 'the burning problem of an empty Chamber and a sterile debate'.

Reform of second reading speeches to include the '15:5' proposal was first proposed by Speaker Andrew in 2003. Speaker Andrew's proposal was recommended by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure in their 2003 report '*Arrangements for second reading speeches*'.

It was again proposed by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure in their report '*Encouraging an interactive Chamber*'.

It should be noted that in the 2003 and 2006 Reports, the Procedure Committee also recommended the inclusion of an 'op-out mechanism'. This would allow a Member to announce, prior to delivering a second reading, that they will not be answering questions after the delivery. It would also allow a Member to listen to a question before deciding whether to answer it.

Proposal Four: Second Reading Speeches – Interventions

I propose that the House of Representatives Standing Orders be amended to allow for brief and directly relevant interventions during a second reading speech. These measures would mirror those that apply in the Main Committee.

The current Standing Orders provide for an intervention during a Main Committee second reading speech. An intervention is where a Member may ask a speaker a brief and directly relevant question.

When recommending the introduction of interventions into the Main Committee, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure in their Report '*The Second Chamber; Enhancing the Main Committee*', noted that the proposal would encourage interactivity and spontaneity of debate.

The Committee also noted that the Chair would play an important role in ensuring that debate would not be abused and degenerate into point scoring.

In his submission to a recent House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure report '*Encouraging an interactive Chamber*' the Clerk of the House updated the Committee on the progress of interjections since their introduction into the Main Committee.

The Clerk noted that since the introduction of the concept in Main Committee there had been 144 interventions. Of those 144, speakers had accepted 100 interventions.

The Clerk also noted that interventions had appeared to have not caused a problem for the Chair.